

Interwoven

FLAMES: PART EIGHT

30th Day of the Shining Light, 30 AoE

The way Tobias had treated that guardian was proof that William had been right. When he'd spoken to his blood-father about Tobias and convinced him that the tiger wasn't like his family and that he could be convinced to do right by the people, he'd worried on some level that he was seeing only what he wanted to see. That Tobias had been crushed, and all trace of that sweet little cub had been eradicated by time and the march of his family.

But he'd grown. Even as he explained what had happened and how he'd survived avoiding the other guardians and kingsblades, William had been nothing but impressed with the prince's ability to evade his pursuers. And then, at the end of it all to show mercy to someone who had no intention of harming him but stood alongside those who did? William was certain. He knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Tobias had to live to take the throne.

He'd been less thrilled, of course, with William telling him that. It had been a foregone conclusion of course, after Tobias had confronted William about wanting to kill Fredrick. It was the only outcome possible after all, regardless of what the prince wanted. The alternative, even he had to admit, was far worse. That it was his duty whether he liked it or not was a line Tobias had been very used to hearing, but for the first time he seemed to truly accept it.

That, however, was a concern for the evening. They had to survive the morning and the afternoon first.

When they reached the secret entrance back into the castle again, William had emerged first to ensure that the storeroom was clear. Only then did Tobias creep out after him. They'd argued briefly about the route to the Institute, and it was only when Tobias reminded William that he'd learned about new passages because of the Institute itself that they were able to find the right route there.

It was a cautious route, and far slower than the one that William would have liked. Midday marched steadily toward them, and with it the beginning of the revolution. If they weren't in position, then he wouldn't be able to destroy the vault's contents before Fredrick could loot the place. He'd been forced to follow along behind the prince as he led him from one passage to the next, ducking in and out of sight and away from guardian patrols.

At least that had been effective, however; Tobias had clearly had plenty of practice in the last few hours with staying out of their way. He'd also not been willing to answer any of William's questions about it, save to say that it had been a harrowing and terrifying experience. It wasn't as though the hyena could blame him. He had been hunted with intent to kill in his time as a soldier. It was nothing new to him, but a prince? Of course that would be difficult.

When at last they reached the door to the Institute, that pentagram sigil burned into its door, Tobias stopped at last. William put his back to the wall right beside the door, glancing either way. “You’re sure you can get us in?”

“A little bit late to ask me that question, don’t you think?” Tobias sighed as William frowned at him. When the tiger looked over, he lifted an eyebrow and shrugged. “What? What do you want from me? Yes, I can get us in as long as I can get past the... well, the sentry.”

William held the tiger’s stare. “A sentry?” Everything Tobias had said about the vault never made mention of a sentry. It stood to reason that there was some form of protector there, but that would complicate accessing the vault. “We don’t have time for this, Tobias.”

“Yes. I know, of course. I...” He frowned as he brushed his robes back. Normally the folds of those robes concealed the belt that Tobias wore, but as the tiger pulled it aside William could see numerous little pouches, compartments, and a sheathed dagger. “Give me a minute. I’ll get us inside. I can handle it, I promise.”

The hyena grimaced. “A minute might be all you’ve got.” He nodded to Tobias even as the tiger sighed. “Go. Come get me as soon as we’re in.”

Tobias winced, but he nodded. He hesitated before opening the door however, eyes still on William. “Yeah. And... thanks. For coming back for me.”

“You can thank me when this is all done.” That assumed that the prince would want to thank him, once he learned what else was about to happen in Sanwell. William tried to cover it up with a quick smile and a nod. “Now hurry up, alright? Sooner we’re done with this, the sooner it’s all over.”

“Y-yeah. Uh, right. See you in a moment.” Tobias nodded, but before he could open the door William saw the prince’s eyes dart past him. “Oh no.”

William turned his head to follow Tobias’ gaze and cursed under his breath. It was a kingsblade – Javan, the mink’s name was – who had just emerged from a side room and turned toward them. He’d frozen in place, staring at the prince and his protector. William took a slow breath and held it as Javan started to make his way down toward them. “Tobias? Perhaps you could hurry.”

He didn’t see the prince’s nod, but he definitely heard Tobias rush up and through the door, closing it behind him. William glanced back behind him; without Tobias in the way, he could see the empty corridor in that direction. Good. The odds of warriors resting in the library were slim to none. He didn’t have to worry about being flanked. “Good morning, Javan.”

“Good morning, William.” The mink nodded his head as one paw came to rest on the hilt of his hatchet. He didn’t draw it though, and he didn’t reach for his battleaxe. A small favour only; William knew it was only a matter of time. “You probably haven’t heard the news. I’m sorry to be the one to share it.”

“I’ve heard some things. Maybe you could confirm them for me.” William pushed off from the wall, placing himself in the middle of the corridor as Javan stopped in place. The mink just watched him, and William kept his paws at his side and nowhere near his weapons. Tobias had spared a guardian; maybe William could spare a kingsblade. Buy the prince more time. “Tobias has been accused of treason?”

“Just so.” The mink’s eyes flicked over William’s shoulder, but just to the door the hyena protected. “But it’s worse than that, I’m afraid. You’ve been implicated as well.”

William nodded once. He’d expected as much, but Javan wasn’t looking to attack him. He still had time. “You don’t seem especially bothered by an order to kill me. Or is that just the guardians?”

The mink smirked at that. “No, that’s unfortunately us as well. To cut you down on sight, I believe our liege put it. Dreadful business. I certainly don’t believe what’s been said of you, and I would very much prefer to avoid what’s to come.”

And yet there he was, pointedly speaking with William and not actually cutting down anything. “That’s funny. You always struck me as a very driven kingsblade. You’re slacking in your duties right now; I’m standing here, definitely not being killed.” He tried a smile as the mink nodded. “Fredrick would be very disappointed, you know.”

“I know.” At that Javan reached back to his battleaxe and unslung it from his back. He didn’t bring it up into a combat stance however, and instead left the head to rest against the ground as he leaned into it. “Just giving you your due. You’ve done nothing but bring honour and respect to the ranks of the kingsblades. Been a truly impeccable warrior.” He paused as his face softened. “You honour your father’s name, your father’s life, your father’s deeds, and this whole realm. You don’t deserve this, William, and... I hate to do this, I promise you.”

“I believe you, so don’t do this. You do have a choice, whatever Fredrick might have told you.” William reached carefully to the hilt of his sword, but Javan didn’t approach. Not yet. William let his fingers close around the hilt, but left it in its sheath for the moment. “My father – the one you claim I honour so much – stood up for what was right. He defied his king when his king had done wrong, just as I am. You could take the same stand, and stand with me instead of against me.” He reached out, extending a paw toward the mink.

Javan smiled sadly and shook his head as William sighed and lowered his paw again. It had been worth a shot. “I am sworn to the crown of Ratholarin, whoever sits the throne. My king has given me an order. On my honour, I must obey it.” He slowly pulled his axe back up, twisting the haft in his paws as he steadied himself. “I beg your forgiveness, my friend, but I understand if you cannot give it.”

The mink stayed still, but it would have been rude – and pointless – to stall for time after that. William sighed as he steadily drew his Carisi sword. The runes were silent and dark, but so much the better. He didn’t need them for this fight. “I can. Know you are forgiven, Javan.” William raised his sword high over his head, and watched as Javan did the same with his axe. “Fight well, my friend.”

With a smile, the mink lowered his axe and finally dropped into a combat crouch. “And you, William. Fortune be with you.” He closed his eyes for a moment as his whole body stilled. William took up a defensive stance, his blade across his body as he watched the mink open his eyes once more. The friendliness and respect was gone. In its place was a single, duty-driven impulse. *Kill*. He charged.

The mink skidded to a halt right before William. The hyena’s strike, designed to block the swing of Javan’s axe, caught nothing but air. It left him exposed, and with barely a moment to dance backward from the thrust of the axe. The blow still landed, albeit shallowly as the

head of the axe jabbed into William's gut. The hyena grunted and lifted a leg, kneeling the head of the axe up and out of his way as he brought his sword up again. It caught the axe on its descent, forcing the strike aside.

Javan lifted a paw from the haft of the weapon and swing his fist in a vicious backhand toward William's face. The blow only narrowly missed the hyena's muzzle as he drew back, but Javan's eyes widened in surprise as William brought his head right back forward again. He tilted down, slamming his forehead against the mink's muzzle. There was a crack of broken bone and a muffled cry of pain as something warm and wet splattered across William's forehead.

He pulled back as Javan stumbled away from him, his axe dropped by reflex as both paws rushed to his muzzle. William extended a leg to coax the axe closer to himself than his opponent, his foot sliding it further and further from Javan's reach. He was almost caught off-guard when the mink suddenly dropped his paws away from his bloody muzzle and dove toward William. There wasn't time to think, and instinct kicked in. William stepped to the side even as both paws closed around the hilt of his sword, and he swept it up across the mink's trajectory.

The hatchet that had been yanked from Javan's belt clattered to the ground a moment before the mink himself did. A stroke of blood painted the corridor; a spattering of red from the deep cut right across the loyal kingblade's chest. William winced, bowing his head as he drew his sword back down to his side again. He turned slowly to look down at Javan as the mink rolled onto his back, two shaky paws trying desperately to stem the bleeding in his chest.

William grit his teeth as he stepped over to kneel down beside the mink. Javan's eyes focused up on him for a moment before they began to drift again. "Beg mercy." The words came in a wavering tone, but that no doubt had more to do with pain than fear. All at once William wished that he'd struck a cleaner blow. Maybe Javan could have been spared. Or maybe his death would have been instant, and *William* could now have been spared. Guilt closed like a vice around his heart.

But such hopes for potential outcomes were simply not to be, and the guilt he felt was something he would just have to bear. William glanced down at his sword, its edge reddened by the mink's blood. It was a last request from a fellow warrior. He couldn't deny it, no matter how much he wanted to or how horrific the practice seemed in that moment. William could only nod as he whispered back to Javan. "Of course. Go in peace, my friend."

"Fortune smile upon you, William. I wish you success." Javan smiled, his teeth bloody as William stood again. He touched the tip of his sword to Javan's gashed chest, right over his breast. The hyena closed his eyes. Hesitated. *Pushed.*

Javan's gasp reached his ears even if he didn't see his sword drive into the mink's heart. Resistance came only when the tip of the blade emerged from Javan's back and struck the floor. He held there for a moment before he could bring himself to twist the blade, wrenching it through the kingblade's heart. He pulled it free a moment later, with the sickening *schlorp* of a weapon withdrawn through viscera.

When he finally opened his eyes, it was to Javan's still face. He had closed his own eyes, and William watched as the mink's last breath rattled free of his throat. His body relaxed

and lay still as the hyena shuddered. He knelt down one last time and touched his paw to the mink's forehead. "Be at peace. I honour you in your duty and shall carry your name forward."

He stood from Javan's body, but frowned as he looked down over the kingsblade's body. The traditional Ratholarin crest that was displayed atop the chainmail armour that all kingsblades wore was torn asunder by the swing of William's sword, but that just exposed what lay beneath it. The tip of his sword drifted to the emblem and peeled it aside as he frowned, then gasped.

It was a sigil, but one he had seen before at least in part. The elegant lettering about it was foreign to William, but there was no way he could have missed the symbol of Guavi. Not after all of his time studying the divines and their magic at the behest of his blood-father. Why it was there and what possible purpose it could have served was beyond him. Had Javan been a gods-worshipping person? Someone who could have been swayed to the cause if he'd only known what questions to ask?

But no. As William stared down at the sigil, he knew better. For one, Javan had been nothing but contemptuous of the divines in his idle moments. The emblem itself was freshly woven into the fabric, and until him it probably had never seen any damage or wear. This had been crafted specifically for him to wear, and given recently. If not that very morning, then no more than two days past. And the risk of being discovered with such iconography on his person, in the position of a kingsblade? It was unthinkable. Which meant that the sigil had been put there deliberately, but without Javan's knowledge. It still left the important question to be answered: why?

William glanced back at the door to the Institute. Tobias was still not back. The fight hadn't taken long, but the tiger needed to *move*. He briefly considered going in after him and forcing whatever sentry was there to allow them access, but Tobias had seemed confident of his ability to handle the situation. He just had to trust that the prince had matters well under control.

That trust was strained a moment later as a pair of guardians rounded a corner down the distant end of the corridor. They would see him in moments, even if their helms obscured the greater whole of their vision. If not him, certainly they'd see Javan's body. He stepped back toward the door and gave it a gentle rap with his knuckles. "Tobias? I hope things are going well in there!"

One of the distant guardians lifted their arm to point at William, and then both of them drew their swords. "Damn it all." William hefted his own and watched as one of them began to lumber quickly down the hallway toward him. The other turned back the way he had come. No doubt he was going to warn the others. That was trouble.

And worse, William didn't know just how much time had passed. There was no window outside; no way to see just how far the sun had travelled across the sky that day. It could be morning still, and the rebels had yet to make their move. It could be midday already and they had failed. There was no way to know. No way to be certain of whether or not the castle's forces were going to be diverted to the city. He needed that distraction, and he needed it five minutes ago!

“Damn it all, Tobias!” William stepped away from the door and Javan’s body, willing the fire inside him to rush down his arm and into the sword. The runes carved into its blade sparked to life, casting embers across the floor as he raised the weapon before the charging guardian. He smirked as the armoured warrior’s approach stalled out, though only for a second. He wondered what had to have flashed through the guardian’s mind at the sight of the weapon.

The attack came as a series of quick slices, cutting skilfully through the air toward William. He kept his defence tight, the swift arcs of the guardian’s sword meeting the flat of William’s blade once, twice, thrice. He jumped back as the guardian lifted a leg to kick at his shins, and growled as he adjusted his grip on the hilt of his weapon.

Again came a quick and tight trio of slices from the guardian, but that time William knew what to expect from them. The first was brushed aside by the flat of his own weapon, while the second found itself knocked just further away. That gave him enough room to will the flames within him to surge along the blade of his sword, and the whole weapon took on a heat shimmer as he twisted it up. The guardian’s sword swung in, blade rushing toward William’s blade as the hyena stepped into him.

No sooner had the edges met than William’s sword began to cleave right through the guardian’s. There was a shout of disbelief as the top half of the warrior’s weapon severed from the bottom, spinning off behind William. Meantime, William’s blade continued right up past it with barely any resistance. It sliced right into and through the guardian’s thick plate armour with a little more effort, and William grunted as he angled his sword up and through the guardian’s throat.

There he stopped, holding his blade steady as it rested there, lodged in the guardian’s neck. A gurgle came through the cut he’d forged, before with a snarl of exertion William yanked his weapon free again and kicked out with a foot. It sent the guardian tumbling lifelessly down to the floor, his blood spilling out across the hallway as William looked back up behind his opponent. The guardian that had raised the alarm was on his way down toward William, but at least then he’d decided to wait for reinforcements. Smart.

Smart, but unhelpful. William glanced back over his shoulder as footsteps reached his ears. One of the castle scholars, a panther dressed in the robes of his station had stepped into the corridor from the library entrance, only to gasp and freeze up at the sight of a dead kingsblade. He looked up, slack-jawed at William as the hyena frowned. “Good morning.”

“I-I... uh...”

“Perhaps you had best leave this area.” He nodded sharply to the panther as he heard the clanking of plate armour approaching.

“Y-yes. I... of course. Thank you.” The panther approached cautiously, picking his way delicately over Javan’s body before he passed William by. No sooner had he cleared the area than he charged down the corridor toward the safety of the guardians. They numbered three, filling the corridor as they made their way toward William but something was wrong. The cold, dark holes in their helmets that allowed them to see were *not* dark. Instead they were lit from within by a dim, but discernible, violet glow.

And worse, William could *feel* their eyes on him. Divine power burned within those armoured suits. It resonated with the fire that filled him. Like met like and he knew

immediately. Those weren't guardians marching toward him. Or, at least, it wasn't *just* guardians marching toward him. *Guavi*.

The magic of Guavi drove their every motion.

Suddenly, William was very, very glad that Daniel's guardian armour had been taken from him. The armoured figures marched in step, watching William with an intensity that showed through those helms. As one they drew their swords. The confused panther stumbled before them, unsure where to go or how to clear their approach. William began to frown, but his eyes widened as the nearest of the guardians simply raised their sword and brought it down into the panther's shoulder.

He gasped as the panther cried out in pain, only for the guardian to slice the blade up and into the feline's neck. They kicked the bloody panther off their weapon and moved back into synchronised march with the others as William shuddered. Whatever had happened to them had stripped them of all that they were. So many guardians were sadistic, but that was so much more brutal than William had ever seen.

There was no time to linger on it however, as the guardians swiftly picked up the pace. They broke into a jog, shoulder to shoulder as they charged William down. He raised his sword, the runes flashing to life once more as a wave of metal plating and biting blades drew closer and closer to him. William lowered himself into a crouch, turning to the side as he raised his sword. The guardians shimmered in the heat of his blade as he held his breath, waiting for the right moment to strike. A part of him wondered if such a moment could exist as they filled his vision.

The time to find out came all at once. The guardians silently broke from their perfectly measured motions. The ones to either side darted forward more quickly, and the leftmost swung high at William while the other sliced low. The hyena growled as he ducked the upper blade and jammed the tip of his sword into the stone floor. It held firm against the swing of the lower blade, but he still buckled somewhat behind the force of the blow. It was so much the better, as William slid into a quick roll backward. The middle guardian's stab would otherwise have sliced right down his swordarm.

Instead William rose again as he bumped into Javan's body. He had nowhere else to really retreat to, and with a grunt he feinted quickly to the left. The guardian raised their blade to block, and that forestalled any assault from that quarter. Instead though William parried a quick second strike from the rightmost guardian, but was forced to block an attack by the middle soldier before he could take advantage. William snarled wordlessly as he backed up, leaping over Javan's body to give himself a little more room.

Precious little remained before the end of the corridor however, and William knew he didn't have the space to fight off all three. The runes of his sword burst brighter as he fed them with the fire burning inside of him, and he all but roared as he swung up across the descending sword stroke of the left-side guardian. A flash of his Carisi blade severed the weapon cleanly in half before he ducked back from another quick couple of cuts from the other two warriors. A flick of his sword batted aside one of their swords, but another stab forced him to back up again.

No sooner had he than the left-side guardian thrust the melted stump of their sword in William's direction. It singed his exposed fur even as he pirouetted and thrust forward, pushing the flame within him down his arm and through his weapon. The thrust buried his sword deep, but the guardian made no sound even as William melted his way into the warrior's chest. Instead he caught a backhanded blow for his trouble.

It set him stumbling back against the wall as William tasted blood, and he blinked his vision clear as the three warriors continued, all but undaunted, toward him. The left-side guardian didn't bother to pull William's sword free, even as it sizzled inside him. What foul magic was driving these soldiers!?

Faced with such fearsome resolve, William knew that he had no choice. Everything that he'd learned and honed flashed into his mind all at once as he ducked away from another vicious swing. The end of the corridor loomed behind him. Trapped. Pinned. Embers swirled about his fingers as he drew them back behind himself. Reached down *deep*. Grit his teeth. Growled.

The growl turned into a shout of exertion as he thrust his paws forward again, channelling as much of that divine heat through his arms as he could. Every vein under his flesh glowed orange brightly enough to be visible through his fur. The power rushed through him, and it erupted as a blast of flame from both paws. It came with an almost ear-splitting *boom* as the air before William compressed and blasted down the corridor. He lost sight of the guardians and the violet glow in their helmets' eyes as a swirling pulse of almost liquid fire washed over them. It cascaded down the hallway, well past the Ratholarin Institute door.

As the glow in his veins faded away again, so too did William's vision for a moment. His body turned limp as though someone had just struck him in the back of the head; his muzzle ran dry and eyes crossed. He slumped to his knees and barely managed to lift a paw in front of him to stall his fall. It didn't stop him for long, and William's head spun as he slipped down on his side to the floor.

When he blinked his vision clear, the guardians were mostly down. The middle and left-most guardians were on the floor as sure as William himself was; his sword still protruded from the chest of the latter, but neither warrior drew breath. The third was still up, but had been knocked back considerably by the force of the eruption. Their fur and flesh crackled within his armour, melting inside the plates even as William struggled to rise. Still they began to approach again, sword clutched tightly in a gauntlet that had melted and fused its plates together to seal it into the guardian's grasp.

William managed to make it up to his knees before the guardian reached him, and he lifted his head as his vision began to focus up once again. He bared his teeth and lifted his paws as the guardian raised the sword above their head, ready to try and catch the descending blow. The guardian watched him. Held. *Held*.

And then, before they could strike, the warrior finally succumbed and toppled backward. Their body continued to sizzle within the armour as William sagged in relief. He heaved a deep, exhausted sigh as he placed a paw on his knee, forcing himself back up with a groan. That blast of flame had been one of desperation. Raw power, not refined. He couldn't do that again if he intended to stay conscious.

He forced moisture back into his muzzle as he shook out his legs and stepped over to the guardian impaled on his sword. It pulled free easily, though it felt heavier in William's paws than it had before. Its own flames were out, and the hyena felt no immediate need to relight them as he started back down toward the Institute door. Javan's body was almost unrecognizable; the mink's chainmail had all but fused to his charred skin, much of his fur had been melted away by the flames, and William all but choked on the scent of roasted meat as he braced himself against the wall. "So sorry, my friend..." That desecration was something he could try to atone for later, if he lived long enough to try.

When William's eyes lifted again though, it was to the sight of more guardians on approach. A pair marched toward him as he drew himself up tall again, and he could see more figures gathering further down the hall. Their helms were all aglow behind their eye sockets, just as the three he'd just dispatched were. William cursed. The hall was *not* a good place for him to face so many. If he could make them come one at a time, he wouldn't have had to resort to magic!

But he couldn't, and he nevertheless lifted his sword once more as he stepped past the door. Tobias clearly needed more time. Whatever was driving the guardians didn't matter; if Tobias couldn't get them into the vault, it wouldn't matter how exhausted William made himself. The hyena steeled himself and took a slow breath. Despite the magically-induced fatigue that burned in his muscles, William sent a quick pulse of heat through his arms and down into his sword. The runes sparked back to life again. As the pair of guardians drew closer. Closer. Raised their swords to strike.

But before William could block what was to come, a paw grabbed him by the shoulder from behind. It squeezed tight and yanked William back, and he yelped in surprise as he was pulled away from the pair of guardians. He spun as he was tugged through a doorway, and his eyes finally were able to settle and focus on Tobias as the tiger slammed closed the door. It was the entrance to the foyer of the vault, and the prince had just pulled him back through it. "Hey!"

"Move!" Tobias all but shoved William back behind him as the prince drew a thick slat of wood from an indent in the wall, across the back of the door, and into the wall opposite. William could only stumble back and out of the way, watching Tobias barricade them inside. "This won't hold them for long, but it's... it's something."

"It... Tobias, that won't hold them at all!" William reached out to pull Tobias out of the way; the door could provide them a useful funnel to force the guardians to face him one at a time. He figured he could use that.

His paw hit something damp however, and the hyena's eyes dipped to Tobias' side. The tiger's robes were soaking, drenched in blood. The runes in William's sword gave out as he shivered in sudden fear and concern. "Tobias-!"

"It's n-not mine." The tiger's voice was quiet, but he jumped and stepped back as a fist thudded against the door. While it shook at the impact, the barricade slid across it held fast. A string of runes glowed brightly, flashing during the impact and slowly fading again. More magic at Fredrick's disposal. If he wasn't focused on the tiger, William would be more interested in exactly what they were.

The volume of blood and Tobias' response drew William's attention right to him, though. Tobias' eyes were focused on the door, but he was shaking where he stood. Looking down, William could see that the entire side of Tobias' body was covered in splatters of blood, and that dagger, previously sheathed at his side, was in his paw. The dagger of the royal family, identical to the one he'd taken from Fredrick as a cub.

Red ran along its length and dripped from its tip to pool on the ground. "Oh, Tobias..."

He reached out his paw, now unfortunately stained by the blood of the tiger's robe, to try and turn him to face William. He turned easily enough, but his eyes wouldn't lift to meet his gaze. "They w-wouldn't let m-me in..." The tiger's voice was nothing more than a whisper, but he twitched again as another blow struck the door.

William looked back down the room. At the other end rested a desk in front of a set of stairs, and sprawled face down atop it was some form of canid. They weren't moving. When he turned back to Tobias, he could see the prince looking up at him with tearful eyes. William wondered if that's how he'd looked, after he'd taken his first life. "Tobias... you did what you had to do."

"I know." His muzzle trembled. If he knew, he didn't believe it.

The hyena sighed. It would take him days – weeks, even – to process what had just happened; what he'd just done. They didn't even have minutes. "Tobias, I need you to focus on me. Okay? Just focus on me." The tiger nodded as William squeezed his shoulder as tightly as he could manage, eyes shimmering as they locked on his friend. "We need to get to the vault, right now. How do we--"

"Up there." Tobias nodded toward the desk, but he only briefly looked up in its direction before his eyes averted again. William's heart lurched. "The s-stairs. Last bookcase on the... the right. You'll... you'll s-see it."

"We'll see it." William stepped back from Tobias and offered the tiger his paw as another thud sounded at the door. It was repeated a moment later, and Tobias flinched back at each of them. "Just stay focused on me, alright? Take my paw. Hey." He smiled as Tobias started to look away again. He needed the prince to overcome what had just happened. There wasn't time for them to give in to the shock of what he'd done. "Just like we used to. Okay? We're gonna run just like we used to."

Tobias' eyes dropped back to William's paw, but he still seemed stuck to the spot. He cursed silently as he wriggled his fingers. They didn't have this sort of time...! "Tobias... please. I need you. I need you *right now*, and if you don't come with me... I'm dead. We're both dead. I need you, Tobias."

That somewhat sharpened the tiger's eyes. They began to focus again as the thudding at the door continued to ramp up. William sighed with relief as Tobias placed his shaking paw in William's. He even stepped forward first, leaving the hyena to catch up to him as they broke into a run. Just like they used to. It'd been the right thing to say to get the prince moving.

There was a brief moment as they passed by the desk where Tobias almost fell apart again, but William simply squeezed at his paw. His presence seemed to do enough to push the tiger through it, and Tobias hurried once more up the stairs behind the desk. William still

chanced a glance down at the canid at the desk and winced. There were an array of stab wounds in their side and chest. It hadn't been quick, or clean. Tobias had killed them with brute force. No wonder he was so dazed.

He had to get Tobias' mind off the canid's death. As they raced up the stairs and toward the room beyond, William shook his head. "That barrier. It was definitely magic, right? Hey? How does it work?"

The prince didn't answer at once as they emerged into the hall beyond the stairs. Bookshelves lined the walls, interrupted every so often by columns and sconces. As he led William toward the end of the room however, he finally found his voice. "It's n-new as far as I know. It's a w-ward, I think; something like a magical shield... priests of Prosta would use them t-to protect their temples. I don't know."

It was still the steadiest that William had heard him since it happened. That was progress. "Hey, that's good. Means it might hold for a while. Gives us time. You learned a lot about Prosta here?"

"I mean, s-some. Relatively minor god in the pantheon, but fairly well-respected." The tiger's face scrunched up slightly as he took on a more thoughtful expression, as if trying to recall the information. "I think she was one of the gods that Guavi dreamed into existence, or something... but don't ask me how you dream something to life, because I haven't figured that part out yet."

William smiled. He was even starting to sound more like his old self. Good. Very good. If only his own energy could come back so quickly. "Maybe you'll learn enough to ask one day."

The tiger snorted. "I don't think I'd want to meet the gods any more than they'd want to meet me, really." His expression began to dim once more. "Especially n-not after everything happening in... here." He skidded to a halt right in front of the last bookshelf on the right, just like he'd said. "Right here. It's there."

"Looks like the shelves in the library that open up some of the old tunnels." William frowned as he traced his fingers over the engravings.

Tobias nodded as he reached up and pressed a claw into one of the engravings. "If they didn't... yes!" There was a click, and the bookshelf began to slide along the wall the end of the room. "This one needs to be reset... if we don't reset it, it'll take them more effort to open it once they get through that ward."

William frowned as he looked at the impossibly deep set of stairs beyond the bookshelf. There was no way it didn't cut into other rooms in the castle! How had Fredrick managed all of this? "No ward on this one?"

"The ward at the front is meant to keep people out. This is just meant to keep it hidden." Tobias ushered William into the alcove and flicked a small switch just barely inside the passage. The bookshelf shuddered and began to slide back into place again. "Be careful. The Triumvirate will probably be inside... at least one, possibly two."

The hyena nodded and squeezed tightly at his sword. Tobias still clutched his other paw tightly, but William couldn't bring himself to break the contact. Tobias was coming out of his

shock, but he didn't want to say or do anything that would potentially bring his mind back to what he'd done. "Are they fighters?"

Tobias shook his head as he led William down the impossible stairs, toward the lights below. "Scholars. But there's so many magical items here... they know so much more than I do. They could already have found a way to make them work for them without ill effects." He paused. "We must be cautious."

"We will be." William nodded as they made their way down the stairs. At least with something to focus on, Tobias seemed to be doing much better. That was a small favour at least, but it was one that the hyena was more than a little thankful for. If Tobias could just stay focused, the two of them might at least have a chance of making it out of the day alive.

At least, that's what William thought. As they reached the end of the tunnel and it opened up into the vault proper, the kingsblade's eyes went wide. He stumbled to a halt as he looked up at the massive space all around him. The symbols of the gods on the ceiling. The racks and racks of books and items. The *volume* of magical artifacts all around him. He could feel them all, thrumming with the energy they contained. So much magic; so much raw *power* was concentrated in the Ratholarin Institute's vault. It set his very blood to tingling.

Too much power. Caution was one thing, and a wise course to take. For William, the hyena had a very different course in mind. He steeled himself as his eyes narrowed. Fredrick couldn't be allowed to keep this. His father couldn't be allowed to keep this. No one should have amassed so much magic and, if what magic had been woven into those guardians was only the tip of Fredrick's spear, magic itself was too dangerous to be permitted to exist. It would always exist to tempt the minds of people who sought to use it for their own ends.

The hyena grit his teeth. Burning it all down would be a *privilege*.